

Mark 13:1-8...(this scripture immediately follows Jesus' notice of the widow who gave two 'mites' at the temple...which Rev. Larry Stamper suggested meant the widow had "forgiven God for her life.")

1. As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2. Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." 3. When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives [over-against] opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, 4. "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" 5. Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. 6. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. 7. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8. For nation will be risen up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." (Mark 13:1-8)

There is a cartoon of *Mother Goose* which shows her staring out a window, and she says, "You Know you're getting old // You KNOW you're getting old // when Time Flies // even when you're Not having Fun!" The week after next is the first Sunday of Advent, the Christian New Year. In just seven weeks, we'll be at the cultural New Year; it seems like only yesterday people were saying, "I am Done with 2020! It was a bad year and I want to return it! In fact, I tried the Free Seven Day Trial for 2021, and I want to return it, too!" Yet, when the lock down first happened in March of 2020, it seemed to hang on for Ever! Folks, like me who are introverts, welcomed a chance to legitimately stay home and isolate; those of you who need people around and things to do to feel alive, you suffered through a difficult time. Which probably felt like it was taking Forever to get over; and we're not really Over it all yet!

Reading this scripture, I was struck by the idea that we are in the midst of Birth Pains! And that has to do with time. Just as the disciples asked, "When?" "What signs?" so I and all the other first time mothers in our midwives' Birthing classes asked again and again, "How will we know? What will be the signs that I am in labor?" And the midwives looked at us and said knowingly, "Trust us, you'll know." And by golly, they were right! Standing there, looking at the clock that said Midnight, (straight up), speaking to the child within my belly, asking, "Are you sure you want to be born now?" and having that Sharp Pain, that gave me all the answer I needed. I knew!

I was in a play called "Same Time, Next Year" and there is a scene where the woman is pregnant, and suddenly she says, "I'm going into labor!!!" and he says, "Are you sure? It might just be indigestion!" and she says, "Indigestion doesn't make your eyes bug out!" Labor pains are painful, and scary, and even dangerous. They are violent and there's really nothing you can control about them. They also are progressive... they get stronger and more painful and longer and deeper the closer you get to delivering the child within you. The closer to the birth, the more you'll "travail."

One of the dictionary definitions of "travail" is "Working Very Hard." When I was in labor, there were nine people in the room; when Melane was born (at home, with midwives) there were ten. One of those people was my niece who was four years old at the time. Her mom, Kay, had just decided to become a midwife, and she asked her daughter, "So, what do you think, Jenny? Think you'll want to have a baby when you get bigger?" And four year old Jenny answered, "I don't know momma; it looks like it hurts." And Kay responded, "Noooo. She's just working really hard." and I sat up in the bed and looked at Kay and said, "Don't you lie to that child: It Hurts Like HELL!" Poor Jenny has never had any children. She said she's okay with that, but I might need to apologize to her mom and dad.

Which is why I began with talk of time. We are in some serious labor pains now: wars and rumors of war, earthquakes, and volcanoes, and hurricanes and famines...which is why we have crafts of sculpture and jewelry for sale in the back; because there's a famine in Kenya, (and one in Yemen, too), and Luke, in his version of this story, adds "pestilence." Plagues. Do you think a world wide Pandemic that begins with the letter "C" qualifies as "pestilence?" So we have the wars and the earth's labor pains of earthquakes and we have pestilence and famine; this qualifies us as being in Labor.

Now I want to remind you about the flexibility and relational nature of time.... In Genesis, the Lord goes through all these steps of creation: Light//Heaven//Earth, Seas and Plants on the Earth (and maybe in the seas, too, tho' it doesn't say that)//Sun, Moon and Stars (and planets, tho' it doesn't say that, either) for "signs and seasons and for days and years"//and the Creatures of the Sea and Birds of the air// and finally, the Creatures of Earth including humans, Made in God's Image, Male and Female. And I just really don't see all that happening in Six Days. I think the progression is right, but it may have taken Millenia, and is (sort of) still on-going... Creation. On-going. Not done in six 24 hour days.

Which makes me think that we are still in the midst of Labor Pains. Birthing Pains. With the wars and rumors of wars, and the natural catastrophies and the pestilence, tho' these have been going on for Millenia. There have been many times in the history of the planet when all these things were going on together. So we may not be really close to the birth, but we may be. And Birth Pains, in women, or in the world, they get bigger and deeper and more painful and more violent the closer we get to the Birth.

So what are we – what is God – trying to Birth? There are lots of examples in Scripture:

Genesis 1:29-31: "God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.' And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." There was no struggle for survival; there were no big animals killing little animals for food. All lived together in harmony and peace and in 'enough.'

Or these scriptures from Isaiah. Chapter 11:6-9: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid [goat],...

...wait; I have to tell you this story. When Melanie was about two, I used to read a book to her with, you know, "a baby cat is a kitten; a baby dog is a puppy" and one time, Melanie said, "I do it." and she read the story to me..."a baby cat is a kitten; a baby dog is a puppy; a baby goat is a ... don't tell me... a baby goat is a ... don't tell me; don't tell me... a baby goat is a ....Children!"

...the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

Or Isaiah 65:21-25: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They

shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent - its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

Or Jeremiah 29:11- 14: “For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me,” says the Lord, “and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you,” says the Lord, “and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”

Or this one from Jeremiah 31:33: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the Lord: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” says the Lord; “for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

We need to think of what we're birthing; what God is manifesting in and through us, even in this time of turmoil, of travail...

Frederick Buechner wrote a story about how he traveled in an industrial wilderness on the train on the east coast, and found it depressing, and then he got off the train at Union Station in NY and walked down 42<sup>nd</sup> St and saw all the lost people, and the druggies and the prostitutes and the dealers and the homeless folks, and became afraid at how easily he could fall into that pit and not come out and how awful it was for the folks there who were lost and forsaken, and then he got home, and they'd waited dinner for him, and his family was there, and he felt guilty for only a second, because he realized that the feelings of comfort and joy and love he had were needed in the world.

And then, he wrote another piece about the kind of world we may be birthing... he put it into the story of Jesus going into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday and how we celebrate Palm Sunday with joy because we...want it to turn out differently... [Let me read this from a book I got from Maxine Merry, pg. 73 of *A Room Called Remember Uncollected Pieces* published 1984, HarperCollins NY and for the purposes of copyright, let this be not my printed sermon, but a “critical article or review:”]

“Maybe this time, when he is brought before Pilate with his eyes swollen shut and a broken nose, Pilate will sink to his knees before him, and all through the city Romans and Jews, rich men and beggars, saints and thieves, old and young will embrace one another and weep. You can hardly watch him approaching Jerusalem with the sun in his eyes and his bare feet [on] the colts belly, I think, without almost believing that maybe this time what everybody knows is going to happen will somehow not have to happen and something else will happen instead. Judas will be loyal; Peter will be brave. The cross won't have to happen; and all history will be redeemed without agony; and you and I will go to church or wherever else we go not as strangers—afraid of each other, indifferent to each other, broken and lonely for each other and for God in countless hidden ways—and we won't need any choir to sing for us or preachers to preach for us because just being together under God will be song enough, and no Gospel proclaimed from the pulpit will be as eloquent as the Gospel we live out with each other, and nobody will be a stranger because we each of us will be known and cherished by all the rest of us, and there won't be single face among all the faces we see that won't gladden our hearts like the face of our oldest friend.”

living our lives in peace and prosperity and with everyone having enough. The Kin-dom of God on Earth as it is in Heaven. Birth pains increase until deliverance. And we are not in control. God is.

However there are parts of birth pains that are adjustable... What happens happens according to the body of the mother, or in the case of the wars, etc., of the world, and the child being born, the new life coming into being, and of course, God.

After I'd been in labor for nearly twelve hours (my sister was in labor for 42 hours), the midwives told me the the child wasn't coming out; they were "crowning" and not coming out; not being born and it was getting scarier and more dangerous and we needed to do something. So I spoke to the child within me again, and said, "I can't; you'll have to" and I told my unborn child the the next contraction I had I would just relax and let God and the baby do what needed to be done. And I did, and the baby did, and God did.

In the next contraction, I relaxed, let go, and the child pushed off inside me and jumped into the world and her dad had to catch her in mid-air while the umbilical cord unwrapped around her. As he laid her on my breast and she looked into my eyes, she sighed a deep and weary and victorious sigh as though to say, "Whew, momma, that's the hardest thing I've ever done!" and indeed it was as she was less than a minute old.

God knows what God is doing, even when we fill the world with wars and rumors of war, with pestilence, and famine, and the Earth itself revolts against our misuse of her; God knows and loves. And is with us in the birth pains. And takes over when we let go.

We are in the midst of birth pangs, and God only knows how long they'll last. But, as Susan said, if we live in the moment and as Fredrick Buechner said, when we let the goodness of our lives shine where and when they can, we will one day be delivered of our travail, and we will deliver into our broken world, the very lovely new, kind, peaceful and grace-filled world that God envisioned in the beginning, when God began to create the heavens and the earth. Let it be so. Thanks be to God,

Blessings,  
Bethany